



**Skills Builder**  
PARTNERSHIP

2022-25 Version  
[skillsbuilder.org](https://skillsbuilder.org)



# Skills Builder Universal Framework for Essential Skills

## Toolkit for Skills-Building Organisations



# Introduction and context



It has never been more important to build a set of essential skills to succeed in life – whether in education, employment or entrepreneurship: the ability to creatively solve problems, to self-manage, to communicate effectively, and to work well with others.

These are skills that are needed to do almost anything well. The demand for these skills is clear, but there is still a gap – too many individuals do not build these skills to the level they need, and so miss out on opportunities to thrive in other parts of their lives.

Too often this is an area where terminology is confused and confusing. The work of all the organisations in the Skills Builder Partnership is to cut through this, to refine a consistent, universal approach to these essential skills.

We define the essential skills as: Listening, Speaking, Problem Solving, Creativity, Staying Positive, Aiming High, Leadership and Teamwork.

The development of this Universal Framework has been enabled by the Essential Skills Taskforce: CIPD, CBI, Gatsby Foundation, EY Foundation, Careers & Enterprise Company, Business in the Community, and the Skills Builder Partnership

## The Skills Builder Universal Framework

This Universal Framework builds off the original Skills Builder Framework, launched in 2017, which has already proved its worth with children and young people, used in more than 750 organisations in the last year. Through a 9-month process of refinement and testing, it has been extended and improved to be truly universal – usable with individuals at any stage of their education or career and in different contexts.

Within organisations, the Framework can be used to support individuals to:

- **Understand their existing skills:** Reflecting on where their essential skills currently are, and being able to identify any gaps they might have
- **See what progress looks like:** Being able to see what the next steps are to improve their essential skills further or to increase their employability

- **Join the dots:** Using a consistent language and understanding of essential skills to understand how they are used and practiced in lots of different settings
- **Capturing success:** Seeing progress and being able to better articulate their skills to potential employers, education organisations and others

## Working together

The Universal Framework is freely available to all organisations, and you can find a lot more resources and tools to support using it on our website. We hope you will consider joining the Skills Builder Partnership, to work and learn from other aligned organisations who are working together to ensure that one day, everyone builds the essential skills to succeed. To find out more, just get in touch.

## Tom Ravenscroft

CEO, The Skills Builder Partnership  
[skillsbuilder.org](https://skillsbuilder.org)

## Who's using the Skills Builder approach?

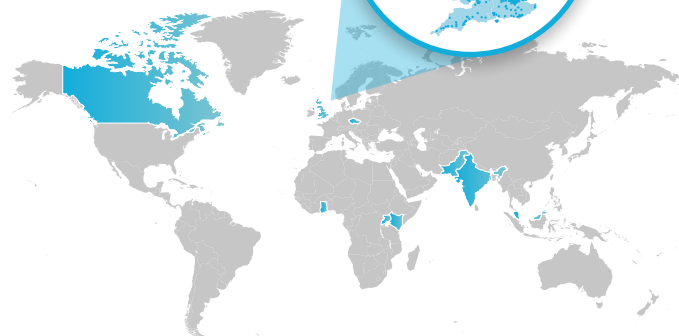
We're building a global coalition of educators, employers and skills-building organisations, all using a shared approach. As these skills are widely transferable, our partner organisations cover a whole range of different industries and outcomes.



### Educators

**75%**

of UK secondary schools and colleges use the Skills Builder approach\*



**432**

Schools and colleges in the partnership globally\*



### Employers

**98**

Employer Partners in 2021-22\*



### Organisations

**151**

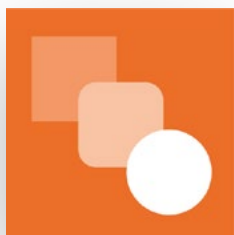
Impact Organisations in 2021-22\*



\*Data from Skills Builder Impact Report 2021

# The Skills Builder Principles

We have learned a lot over the years about how best to build essential skills. We know that to have a real impact, the skills must be developed with consistency and focus. These principles hold true whatever the setting.



## 1. Keep it simple

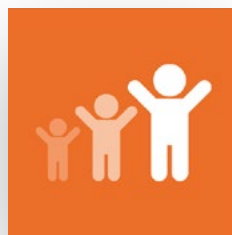
A consistent focus on the same skills helps ensure everyone's shared understanding and makes building these skills as tangible as possible. Using the same language all the time makes a big difference.

### Things to consider:

Does everyone know which essential skills you focus on?

Is there consistent language when referring to the skills?

Do all staff receive training and support on these skills?



## 2. Start early, keep going

Mastering these essential skills isn't simple and takes time and sustained effort. The skills are not just about employability, but about thriving in all aspects of life.

### Things to consider:

Do you think about these skills for all the individuals you work with?

Could you introduce these skills earlier on?

Are there opportunities for individuals to continue to build these skills?



## 3. Measure it

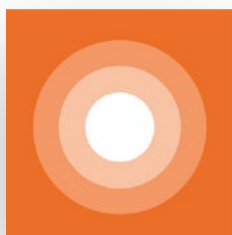
Take time to reflect on the skills of individuals – by observing or by self-assessment. This gives a balanced understanding of strengths and weaknesses, highlights progress and shows next steps.

### Things to consider:

Are you using a consistent skills framework and assessment tool like Skills Builder?

Does your framework reflect quantifiable progress over time?

Do you check in on progress regularly?



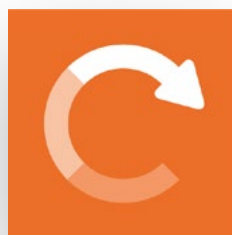
## 4. Focus tightly

Building essential skills should be timely and focused appropriately. It should allow dedicated time just to explicitly build the skill.

### Things to consider:

Is it clear exactly what individuals need to develop next?

Do you make time just to focus on explicitly developing skills?



## 5. Keep practising

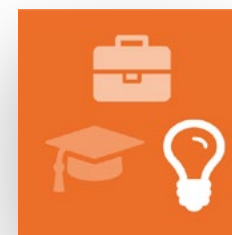
To accelerate progress in the essential skills, they should be used and reinforced as often as possible – including opportunities for reflection.

### Things to consider:

Are there regular opportunities for individuals to use their essential skills?

When they do, are these opportunities highlighted clearly to them?

Is there regular opportunity to actively reflect on the skills and how they have been developed?



## 6. Bring it to life

Ensure individuals see how their essential skills can transfer between different settings and be applied to different problems.

### Things to consider:

Are the skills framed in terms of their usefulness for education, employment or entrepreneurship?

Are there opportunities for individuals to use their skills in different settings?

Do you use links across the organisation to support building these skills?



# The Skills Builder Universal Framework



Our starting point is eight essential skills. Known by many different names, these eight skills map across to the four domains that come up time and again as the core, transferable skills for employment.

In pairs they cover communication, creative problem-solving, self-management, and collaboration skills. These eight skills are laid out in the **Skills Builder Universal Framework**.

The Framework breaks down each of the eight essential skills into tangible

steps which can be developed in turn. We can use it to clarify what success looks like in each skill and to map out the trajectory for growth. The full Framework can be found from page 7.

The Framework is the culmination of four years of learning and builds on the expertise of over 120 leading organisations and individuals across the sector. It has been used with over 750 skills-building organisations. It has also been independently reviewed twice. The background to the development of this version of the Framework can be found at [skillsbuilder.org/universal](https://skillsbuilder.org/universal).

See the complete Framework

turn to  
page **7** ▶



## Listening

*The receiving, retaining and processing of information or ideas*

This skill is all about being able to effectively receive information - whether it comes from a peer, a teacher, or someone else entirely.

Initially, the skill steps concentrate on being able to listen effectively to others - including remembering short instructions, understanding why others are communicating and recording important information.

Individuals then focus on how they demonstrate that they are listening effectively, thinking about body language, open questioning and summarising and rephrasing.

Beyond that, the focus is on being aware of how they might be being influenced by a speaker, through tone and language.

The final steps are about critical listening - comparing perspectives, identifying biases, evaluating ideas and being objective.

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7 / Skills Builder Universal Framework - Education  
skillsbuilder.org

3	Step	Statement	4
	Step 0	I listen to others without interrupting	
	Step 1	I listen to others and can remember short instructions	
	Step 2	I listen to others and can ask questions if I don't understand	
	Step 3	I listen to others and can tell someone else what it was about	
	Step 4	I listen to others and can tell why they are communicating with me	
	Step 5	I listen to others and record important information as I do	
	Step 6	I show I am listening by how I use eye contact and body language	
	Step 7	I show I am listening by using open questions to deepen my understanding	
	Step 8	I show I am listening by summarising or rephrasing what I have heard	
	Step 9	I am aware of how a speaker is influencing me through their tone	
	Step 10	I am aware of how a speaker is influencing me through their language	
	Step 11	I listen critically and compare different perspectives	
	Step 12	I listen critically and think about where differences in perspectives come from	
	Step 13	I listen critically and identify potential bias in different perspectives	
	Step 14	I listen critically and use questioning to evaluate different perspectives	
	Step 15	I listen critically and look beyond the way speakers speak or act to objectively evaluate different perspectives	

1 Skill definition

2 The thematic progression in skill development

3 Individuals will start at different places, so identifying the step first is essential

4 This statement helps individuals understand their own skills

Explore each skill step of the Framework to understand how it is built and to practice it at [skillsbuilder.org/framework](https://skillsbuilder.org/framework)



# Listening

## *The receiving, retaining and processing of information or ideas*

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Individuals then focus on how they demonstrate that they are listening effectively, thinking about body language, open questioning and summarising and rephrasing.

Beyond that, the focus is on being aware of how they might be being influenced by a speaker, through tone and language.

The final steps are about critical listening - comparing perspectives, identifying biases, evaluating ideas and being objective.

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# Speaking

## *The oral transmission of information or ideas*

This skill is all about how to communicate effectively with others, being mindful of whether they are talking to peers, leaders or others in different settings. Initially, this skill focuses on being able to speak clearly - first with well-known individuals and small groups and then with those who are not already known.

The next stage is about being an effective speaker by making points logically, by thinking about what listeners already know and using appropriate language, tone and gesture. Beyond that, individuals focus on speaking engagingly through use of facts and examples, visual aids, and their expression and gesture.

Beyond that stage, speakers will be adaptive to the response of their listeners and ready for different scenarios. The final steps focus on speaking influentially - using structure, examples, facts and vision to persuade listeners.

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Step	Statement
Step 0	I speak clearly to someone I know
Step 1	I speak clearly to small groups of people I know
Step 2	I speak clearly to individuals and small groups I do not know
Step 3	I speak effectively by making points in a logical order
Step 4	I speak effectively by thinking about what my listeners already know
Step 5	I speak effectively by using appropriate language
Step 6	I speak effectively by using appropriate tone, expression and gesture
Step 7	I speak engagingly by using facts and examples to support my points
Step 8	I speak engagingly by using visual aids to support my points
Step 9	I speak engagingly by using tone, expression and gesture to engage listeners
Step 10	I speak adaptively by changing my language, tone and expression depending on the response of listeners
Step 11	I speak adaptively by planning for different possible responses of listeners
Step 12	I speak adaptively by changing my content depending on the response of listeners
Step 13	I speak influentially by changing the structure of my points to best persuade the listeners
Step 14	I speak influentially by changing the examples and facts I use to best persuade the listeners
Step 15	I speak influentially by articulating a compelling vision that persuades the listeners



# Problem Solving

*The ability to find a solution to a situation or challenge*

This skill focuses on how to solve problems, recognising that while part of Problem Solving is technical know-how and experience, there are also transferable tools that individuals can develop and use.

The first steps focus on being able to follow instructions to complete tasks, seeking help and extra information if needed. The next stage focuses on being able to explore problems by creating and assessing different potential solutions. This includes more complex problems, without a simple technical solution.

Beyond this, the focus is on exploring complex solutions - thinking about causes and effects, generating options, and evaluating those options. This extends into analysis using logical reasoning and hypotheses.

Finally, individuals implement strategic plans to solve complex problems, assess their success, and draw out learning for the future.

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Step	Statement
Step 0	I complete tasks by following instructions
Step 1	I complete tasks by finding someone to help if I need them
Step 2	I complete tasks by explaining problems to someone for advice if I need
Step 3	I complete tasks by finding information I need myself
Step 4	I explore problems by creating different possible solutions
Step 5	I explore problems by thinking about the pros and cons of possible solutions
Step 6	I explore complex problems by identifying when there are no simple technical solutions
Step 7	I explore complex problems by building my understanding through research
Step 8	I explore complex problems by analysing the causes and effects
Step 9	I create solutions for complex problems by generating a range of options
Step 10	I create solutions for complex problems by evaluating the positive and negative effects of a range of options
Step 11	I analyse complex problems by using logical reasoning
Step 12	I analyse complex problems by creating and testing hypotheses
Step 13	I implement strategic plans to solve complex problems
Step 14	I implement strategic plans to solve complex problems and assess their success
Step 15	I implement strategic plans to solve complex problems and draw out learning to refine those plans over time



# Creativity

## *The use of imagination and the generation of new ideas*

Creativity is the complement to Problem Solving, and is about generating innovations or ideas which can then be honed through the problem-solving process.

The first few steps focus on the individual's confidence in imagining different situations and sharing their ideas.

The focus is then on generating ideas - using a clear brief, making improvements to something that already exists and combining concepts. Individuals then apply creativity in the context of their work and their wider life. They can build off this to develop ideas using tools like mind mapping, questioning, and considering different perspectives.

The most advanced steps focus on building effective innovation in group settings and by seeking out varied experiences and stimuli. Finally, individuals support others to innovate, by sharing tools, identifying the right tools for the situation and through coaching.

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Step	Statement
Step 0	I imagine different situations
Step 1	I imagine different situations and can say what I imagine
Step 2	I imagine different situations and can bring them to life in different ways
Step 3	I generate ideas when I've been given a clear brief
Step 4	I generate ideas to improve something
Step 5	I generate ideas by combining different concepts
Step 6	I use creativity in the context of work
Step 7	I use creativity in the context of my wider life
Step 8	I develop ideas by using mind mapping
Step 9	I develop ideas by asking myself questions
Step 10	I develop ideas by considering different perspectives
Step 11	I innovate effectively when working in a group
Step 12	I innovate effectively by seeking out varied experiences and stimuli
Step 13	I support others to innovate by sharing a range of tools
Step 14	I support others to innovate by evaluating the right creative tools for different situations
Step 15	I support others to innovate by coaching them to be more creative



# Staying Positive

*The ability to use tactics and strategies to overcome setbacks and achieve goals*

This skill is all about individuals being equipped to manage their emotions effectively and being able to remain motivated, and ultimately to motivate others, even when facing setbacks.

The early steps focus on identifying emotions - particularly feeling positive or negative. Building off that is the ability to keep trying - and then staying calm, thinking about what went wrong, and trying to cheer up and encourage others.

The focus then turns to identifying new opportunities in difficult situations, sharing those, and adapting or creating plans accordingly. At more advanced steps, individuals identify and manage risks and gains in opportunities.

Finally, individuals support others to stay positive by managing their own response, helping others to see opportunities and creating plans to achieve them.

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Step	Statement
Step 0	I can tell when I feel positive or negative
Step 1	I can tell when others feel positive or negative
Step 2	I keep trying when something goes wrong
Step 3	I keep trying and stay calm when something goes wrong
Step 4	I keep trying when something goes wrong, and think about what happened
Step 5	I keep trying when something goes wrong and help cheer others up
Step 6	I keep trying when something goes wrong and encourage others to keep trying too
Step 7	I look for opportunities in difficult situations
Step 8	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and share these with others
Step 9	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and adapt plans to use these opportunities
Step 10	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and create new plans to use these opportunities
Step 11	I identify risks and gains in opportunities
Step 12	I identify risks and gains in opportunities, and make plans to manage them
Step 13	I support others to stay positive, by managing my own responses
Step 14	I support others to stay positive, by helping others to see opportunities
Step 15	I support others to stay positive, by helping others to see opportunities and creating plans to achieve them



# Aiming High

*The ability to set clear, tangible goals and devise a robust route to achieving them*

This skill is about being able to plan effectively - both to achieve organisational goals, and also to set their own personal development targets. Initially, this is about knowing when something is too difficult, and having a sense of what doing well looks like for an individual.

The focus is then about working with care and attention, taking pride in success and having a positive approach to new challenges. Building on this, individuals set goals for themselves, informed by an understanding of what is needed, and then order and prioritise tasks, secure resources and involve others effectively.

At the higher steps, the focus is on creating plans informed by an individual's skill set, with clear targets, and building on external views. At the most advanced level, individuals develop long-term strategies. These are informed by an assessment of internal and external factors, structured through regular milestones and feedback loops.

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Step	Statement
Step 0	I know when I am finding something too difficult
Step 1	I know what doing well looks like for me
Step 2	I work with care and attention to detail
Step 3	I work with pride when I am being successful
Step 4	I work with a positive approach to new challenges
Step 5	I set goals for myself
Step 6	I set goals informed by an understanding of what is needed
Step 7	I set goals, ordering and prioritise tasks to achieve them
Step 8	I set goals and secure the right resources to achieve them
Step 9	I set goals and plan to involve others in the best way
Step 10	I create plans that are informed by my skill set and that of others
Step 11	I create plans that include clear targets to make progress tangible
Step 12	I create plans that are informed by external views, including constructive criticism
Step 13	I develop long-term strategies taking into account strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
Step 14	I develop long-term strategies that use regular milestones to keep everything on track
Step 15	I develop long-term strategies that include feedback loops to support flexibility and adaptability





# Leadership

*Supporting, encouraging and developing others to achieve a shared goal*

This skill is relevant not only for individuals in leadership positions, but also for individuals working with peers in teams. At the earliest stages, the focus is on basic empathy - understanding their own feelings, being able to share them, and recognising the feelings of others. The focus is on managing - dividing up tasks, managing time and sharing resources, managing group discussions and dealing with disagreements.

Beyond that, individuals build their awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, and those of their teams. This allows them to allocate tasks effectively. They then build techniques to mentor, coach and motivate others. At the highest steps, individuals will be able to reflect on their own leadership style and understand its effect on others.

Ultimately, they should be able to build on their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses, and adapt their leadership style to the situation.

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Step	Statement
Step 0	I know how I am feeling about something
Step 1	I know how to explain my feelings about something to my team
Step 2	I know how to recognise others' feelings about something
Step 3	I manage dividing up tasks between others in a fair way
Step 4	I manage time and share resources to support completing tasks
Step 5	I manage group discussions to reach shared decisions
Step 6	I manage disagreements to reach shared solutions
Step 7	I recognise my own strengths and weaknesses as a leader
Step 8	I recognise the strengths and weaknesses of others in my team
Step 9	I recognise the strengths and weaknesses of others in my team, and use this to allocate roles accordingly
Step 10	I support others through mentorship
Step 11	I support others through coaching
Step 12	I support others through motivating them
Step 13	I reflect on my own leadership style and its effect on others
Step 14	I reflect on my own leadership style, and build on my strengths and mitigate my weaknesses
Step 15	I reflect on my own leadership style, and adapt my approach according to the situation



# Teamwork

*Working cooperatively with others  
towards achieving a shared goal*

This skill applies to working within both formal and informal teams, and also with peers, leaders and others. Initially, this is about individuals fulfilling expectations around being positive, behaving appropriately, being timely and reliable and taking responsibility. This extends to understanding and respecting diversity of others' cultures, beliefs and backgrounds.

The next steps focus on making a contribution to a team through group decision making recognising the value of others' ideas and encouraging others to contribute too. Beyond that, individuals improve their teams through managing conflict and building relationships beyond the immediate team. At the top steps, individuals focus on how they influence their team through suggesting improvements and learning lessons from setbacks.

Ultimately, individuals support the team by evaluating others' strengths and weaknesses and bringing in external expertise and relationships.

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Step	Statement
Step 0	I work with others in a positive way
Step 1	I work well with others by behaving appropriately
Step 2	I work well with others by being on time and reliable
Step 3	I work well with others by taking responsibility for completing my tasks
Step 4	I work well with others by supporting them if I can do so
Step 5	I work well with others by understanding and respecting diversity of others' cultures, beliefs and backgrounds
Step 6	I contribute to group decision making
Step 7	I contribute to group decision making, whilst recognising the value of others' ideas
Step 8	I contribute to group decision making, encouraging others to contribute
Step 9	I improve the team by not creating unhelpful conflicts
Step 10	I improve the team by resolving unhelpful conflicts
Step 11	I improve the team by building relationships beyond my immediate team
Step 12	I influence the team by reflecting on progress and suggesting improvements
Step 13	I influence the team by evaluating successes and failures and sharing lessons
Step 14	I support the team by evaluating others' strengths and weaknesses, and supporting them accordingly
Step 15	I support the team by bringing in external expertise and relationships



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